

Chapter 13

Dysfunctional Use of Online Gaming and Socio–Emotional Adaptation at School: A Research Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

Although online gaming can have many advantages, there are still many young people that tend to be excessively addicted to these online technologies, with a negative impact on their emotional and social functioning. For this reason, the attempt to understand the factors related to online gaming dependence and those related to encouraging positive use is an essential area of health promotion and a priority in preventing serious problems in school context. The aim of the study was to analyze psychological factors (anxiety traits and motivation) related to online gaming and the relation between gaming behaviour and emotional and social functioning at school. 62 secondary school students were recruited for the study. The participants completed the TAD (Anxiety and Depression Test), S.E.D.S. (Social-Emotional Dimension Scale), SDQ (Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire) and The Internet Gaming Disorder Scale (IGD) and their time spent online gaming was recorded. The results showed that psychological factors are strongly related to online gaming time and, both seem to play a significant role in structuring gaming behavior abuse and maladaptive school habits.

INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to understand the overuse of video games in young students to try to identify the psychological variables that accompany such usage, which, in many cases, disrupts life habits and undermines adaptive school functioning. It will highlight how today the potential use of these electronic

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games, that were born as tools for free time, have been subverted: they have turned into new forms of addictions that, it should be underlined, influence all the dimensions of the person from the cognitive, to the affective emotional to the social-relational; in fact, all those processes that accompany normal learning in the various contexts of life.

As is clear from the national and international literature, the pervasiveness of this phenomenon and the degenerative effects that the abuse of technology is producing on the population (and not only on adolescents) has led scholars to extend the concept of addiction to explain symptoms resulting from compulsive repetition of these activities, which are mostly socially accepted and do not involve the use of any substance (Del Miglio & Corbelli, 2002). These new addictions, or behavioural addictions, refer precisely to a wide range of behaviours, many of which are internet-dependent.

Internet addiction—Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)—is a non-substance impulse control disorder (Young, 1998) but presents symptoms very similar to those observed in psychoactive substance addictions. In fact, as with dependence on substances, maladaptive use of the internet is regulated by mechanisms of tolerance (need to increase the “doses” to achieve the same effect), abstinence (appearance of specific symptoms following suspension or reduction of time spent surfing) and “craving” (irresistible desire to use the internet). The characteristics of this disorder are the need to spend increasing time on the internet to obtain satisfaction, the marked reduction of interest in other, non-internet-based activities, the inability to interrupt or keep under control usage of the internet and the need to access the network more frequently or for longer periods than initially intended. Moreover, following suspension or reduction of the use of the network, internet dependent subjects can develop psychomotor agitation, anxiety, depression, obsessive thoughts about what happens online and classic withdrawal symptoms. The numerous activities that can be carried out online mean that IAD is not a homogeneous phenomenon but manifests itself in various forms: compulsive online shopping, online gambling, chat addiction, information overload and cybersex.

Risk factors related to the development of IAD include preexisting psychopathologies (depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, drug addiction, pathological gambling), at risk behaviours (excessive use of the internet and reduction of interpersonal relationships) and unfavorable life events (work difficulties, dysfunctional family atmosphere). It is clear that through the internet subjects can experience intense and pleasant feelings of escape, avoiding the problems of real life by going online, but with a negative impact on the relations between the two domains. In fact, the risk is to move away from “face to face” interpersonal relationships, indispensable for a healthy and socially balanced life, towards a preference for virtual relationships; these inevitably lead to depersonalization and a projection of one’s own self into a non-physical place with the ease, speed and geographical breadth of the relationships the subject prefers. The user, by hiding his individuality behind his monitor, feels more protected, more secure.

The symptomatic closeness between IAD and impulse control disorder has led some authors to hypothesize an active role for brain chemistry in the activation of this pathology. In particular, many behavioral addictions are thought to operate at the dopaminergic level; this is confirmed by the fact that pathological gamblers display the same cortical arousal patterns present in drug addicts, so it is likely that on line gaming will stimulate these physiological reward systems rather than simply accessing the internet.

Regarding diagnosis and treatment, IAD is comparable to pathological gambling. Nonetheless, many assert that internet addiction cannot be considered a distinct psychiatric disorder, but a psychological

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